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Helping others rise in the restaurant trade

By Christina Santucci

Eighteen years after traveling to the United States, Moroccan-born Fekkak Mamdouh, 45, has finally found his calling, championing immigrant and workers' rights and running a new business.

After the terrorist attacks at the World Trade Center on 9/11 killed 73 of his Windows on the World restaurant co-workers, Mamdouh helped to open one of the city's first cooperative restaurant ventures. The recent opening of Colors, which was the culmination of a three-year-long effort by its 50 owners, showcased a worker-friendly approach to the restaurant industry.

The non-profit behind the launch of the restaurant — Restaurant Opportunities Center of New York (ROC-NY) — has become a haven for immigrants who want to improve their skills in the marketplace of business and hospitality. And his children have caught a glimpse of a better life, where people strive for the common good.

"My kids march around the house chanting, 'Workers united will never be defeated,'" Mamdouh joked of his three children, Iman, 10, Zackaria, 8, and Mohammed, 2 months.

But success did not come easily for Mamdouh, who came to America without any understanding of the English language and with most of his family still living in Morocco.

After studying physics and chemistry in his homeland, Mamdouh made his way as a young man to Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a business manager and tutor to a royal family, whose identity he did not want to disclose. The family took a trip to Disneyland, and on a whim, Mamdouh decided to stay in this country.

Mamdouh spoke only Arabic and French, so finding a job with decent pay was a big struggle.

"Still, back then it was much easier than



THE QUEENS COURIER/photo by Christina Santucci
Fekkak Mamdouh, 45, is championing immigrant and workers' rights and running Colors Restaurant, one of the city's first cooperative restaurant ventures.

today," he said.

For about a year, he tried finding work at car washes and at restaurants as a delivery

boy, but he was not hired. When a friend of his brother introduced him to a restaurant owner, Mamdouh jumped at the

opportunity.

Mamdouh called himself "lucky" to have risen from the position of bus boy to waiter at Chez ma Tante after only three months of working in New York.

About the same time, he met his wife Fatima, who was taking classes at New York University, and after they got married, the couple moved to Astoria.

In 1998, Mamdouh found a job as a waiter in Windows on the World, the legendary restaurant atop the World Trade Center. Only three years later, he was getting ready for work when he heard that terrorists had flown two planes into the towers.

Following the tragedy of 9/11, job openings were particularly scarce, especially for minorities. "There was a lot of backlash against people who looked like me."

Eventually Mamdouh developed an idea for a restaurant, one at which every worker would have an equal share in the business.

Co-director Saru Jayaraman helped fill in the details for Colors, and the pair also founded ROC-NY whose main goal is to educate minorities about higher positions in the restaurant industry.

Colors, located at 417 Lafayette Street in Manhattan now offers English as a Second Language classes as well as waiter or bartender training. Instruction is held during the day in the restaurant, which will be open only for dinner for the first year.

"We don't want people to feel sorry for us. We want [Colors] to be a place to come with your first date, someplace to bring your wife, to have fun."

While working to open Colors, Mamdouh said that he had little time to spend at home with his family, but it was important for him to give back to his community and his adopted city.

"[My family] see[s] me on TV, and they think what I am doing is very good."



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- Fekkak Mamdouh